Interview – Hafsa Kanjwal

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Hafsa Kanjwal is an Assistant Professor of South Asian History in the Department of History at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, where she teaches courses on the history of the modern world, South Asian history, and Islam in the Modern World. As a historian of modern Kashmir, she is the author of Colonizing Kashmir: State-building Under Indian Occupation (Stanford University Press, 2023), which examines how the Indian and Kashmir governments utilized state-building to entrench India's colonial occupation of Kashmir in the aftermath of Partition. Currently, she is working on two book projects. The first is a general history of modern Kashmir. The second examines questions of Muslim political sovereignty and the secular, liberal international order in the context of 20th and 21st century Kashmir. Hafsa has been published in a variety of journals and books, including Women's Studies Quarterly, Economic and Political Weekly, Routledge Handbook of Critical Kashmir Studies and Political Violence in South Asia. She has also written and spoken on her research for a variety of news outlets including The Washington Post, Al Jazeera English, and the BBC. She received her Ph.D. in History and Women's Studies from the University of Michigan and a Bachelors in Regional Studies of the Muslim World from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

Where do you see the most exciting debates/research happening in your field?

I situate myself broadly in South Asian History and Critical Kashmir Studies, as well as Modern Islam. In all of these fields, what excites me are works that reveal the construction of or contest the inevitability of certain aspects of the modern world—the nation-state, secularism, liberalism. Works that challenge the Euro-centric epistemological frameworks from which we understand these particular fields are particularly exciting. They are part of a broader trend to decolonize some of these fields, although of course there is still a long way to go.

I am especially excited by research that moves beyond the borders of the nation-state, and attempts to show historical connections between places and peoples based on shared ethical practices or experiences that cannot be reduced to simplistic understandings of territory or belonging, such as Mana Kia's*Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin Before Nationalism.* These works challenge our contemporary conceptual categories of people, region, and territory, in this case a category such as "Indo-Persian," which already assumes the two to be distinct entities. Another exciting work is Radhika Mongia's *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State*, which first introduced me to the concept of methodological nationalism, an assumption that the nation-state is the natural political from or unit of analysis, that can even be deployed to explain developments in earlier historical periods. Using the study of colonial migration regulations, Mongia highlights how contemporary forms of state sovereignty and territoriality took shape.

I am also excited by scholarly works that take religion and religious subjectivities and logics seriously. Two works in particular are Sher Ali Tareen's *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* and Darryl Li's *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity.* The first looks at polemics between the Deobandis and Barelvis in South Asia on the question of the Prophet's memory and normative example. Tareen's work pushes back against the dominant scholarly attempts to see shifts in Islamic thought and practice in the colonial period as akin to a Protestantization of Islam, which have persistently relied on the overused categories of law/mysticism, reform/tradition, moderate/extremist, enchanted/disenchanted, orthodox/unorthodox, and so on. Li's work takes on the figure of the "foreign fighter" in the case of the Bosnian War, and argues that transnational jihad should be seen

as a universalist project.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I am part of what we can call the 9/11 generation, a generation whose identity, and even aspirations, were fundamentally transformed and shaped as a result of the War on Terror. As I began my academic journey, I had to unpack many of my own assumptions about American exceptionalism, empire, feminism, and liberalism. Over the years, I've learned from a range of intellectuals, from women of color feminists, to the black radical tradition and various anti-colonial thinkers. But I think I have been the most impacted by the field of Critical Secularism Studies as well as an engagement with the writings of Muslim intellectuals in the modern period, often grappling with very similar and resonant themes of how to respond to the European colonial onslaught, not just on material or political terms, but also epistemologically.

You have been involved in the growing field of Critical Kashmir Studies. What does this include and how does this relate to the fields of critical and postcolonial international relations?

For decades, the way the history of Kashmir was told was through an understanding that it was a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan. The people of Kashmir, their histories, aspirations, and experiences of living in the world's most militarized zone were not foregrounded. Statist and national security frameworks shaped how Kashmir was viewed, including in the academy.

Kashmiris in Kashmir have always contested these narratives and attempted to write their own. Critical Kashmir Studies (CKS) builds on this work and challenges the statist and nationalist scholarly narratives that dominate the study of Kashmir. In particular, it takes an anti-occupation and anti-colonial approach to the study of Kashmir. Some of this work has been historical – it has, for example, challenged how 1947 has been narrated by bringing into view the Poonch Rebellion and the Jammu Massacre. Other works have been in literary and cultural studies, examining both the discursive and visual domain of colonial narratives on Kashmir, as well as how Kashmiris have resisted through art, poetry, and literature. A bulk of this work has been anthropological, looking at how India's occupation has operated through a variety of mechanisms, and also how Kashmiri subjectivities have been transformed as a result. While there is still a lot more work to do in a variety of disciplines to further develop CKS and to ensure that it continues to challenge "assumed" frameworks, I see it as a generative space for not just thinking about Kashmir, but also the modern state, occupation, sovereignty, resistance, nationalism, militarism, colonialism, settler colonialism, ecocide, amongst other topics.

I think there are some overlaps between postcolonial international relations and CKS, especially with regards to understanding how the long-lasting impact of colonialism and imperialism shapes the unequal power dynamics in the contemporary world order. But, I do think that when we imagine the "colonial" in postcolonial, it is often in reference to European colonial powers and the ways in which the encounter with Europe fundamentally transformed colonized societies. There needs to be a greater discussion about colonialism within the 'global south' and also how formerly colonized countries, like India, are colonial powers.

What makes Kashmir an 'international' issue? Why is it relevant to study Kashmir in the realm of international relations?

Kashmir has historically been at the crossroads of multiple regions, and thus, remained linked to broader social, political, and cultural developments across multiple sites. It has also always been an international issue—even before Partition and the first India-Pakistan war and subsequent UN resolutions calling for a plebiscite to take place in the region. For example, during the British colonial period, British officials were deeply anxious about Kashmir falling into the Russian orbit during the Great Game, and subsequently sought to deepen their involvement in Kashmir's affairs. Great power rivalries have, and continue, to shape developments within Kashmir. Even today, after the Abrogation of Article 370, Kashmir remains an international issue, especially given contemporary geopolitics between India, China, and the United States.

Kashmir is relevant to the study of international relations because it cuts across a number of issues that are critical for the study of IR—international law, human rights, territorial sovereignty, self-determination, the role of religion, climate change, and colonialism and decolonization, to name a few. Developments in Kashmir have striking resonances with other parts of the modern world, and thus, allow students of IR to situate certain concepts within a particular context.

In your recent book, *Colonizing Kashmir,* you argue that the period of 'decolonisation' in India was accompanied by its colonisation of Kashmir. How does this enhance our understanding of the boundaries between colonial and postcolonial across the formerly colonised countries? How did a decolonising nation justify its, as you suggest, colonial role in a new territory?

When we think about colonialism, we often think about it as something that has happened in the past, and now we are in a postcolonial period and may be reeling from the impact of colonialism, but that decolonization has happened even if it is incomplete or imperfect. Sometimes, the term neocolonialism is used to describe the existing power relations between the global north and the global south especially through international institutions and the market economy. Yet, as I mentioned before, power differentials within the global south are not often seen within a colonial frame, especially when the two regions (like Kashmir and India) are geographically contiguous.

Now what the context of Kashmir can help us think about is that even as these formerly colonized regions became independent from European rule—their nationalist projects engaged in colonialism in regions that did not fit so easily into the national body (which would then later be derogatively termed as secessionist or separatist movements). And I think that provides a very different lens into state-formation in the context of these new "postcolonial" nation-states.

My book examines the ways through which India enabled and justified its colonialism—using democracy, empowerment, secularism, state-building and development. These are all processes that are seen as having a positive connotation, but in the early years of India's colonial occupation of Kashmir, these processes worked in tandem to suppress Kashmiri demands for sovereignty or self-determination.

Your book suggests that through its emphasis on development and progress, the Indian state follows a "politics of life" in Kashmir. It also highlights its turn towards 'necropolitics' through the instances of violence, rape and torture of Kashmiris by different central governments. How do you explain the seeming contradiction between a state that simultaneously governs Kashmiris through death and life?

Colonial and occupying powers utilize a variety of modalities of control in regions they have colonized, or where their legitimacy is challenged. One mechanism is shifting from indirect rule to direct rule, as the British did with India after the 1857 rebellion. In my research, I observed how India engaged with the politics of life as well as more necropolitical modalities of control in Kashmir, sometimes even at the same time. Other times, one would be given more focus than the other. While a state governing through death or life may appear to be in contradiction, it is actually not. The idea is to entrench colonial rule and to transform political subjectivities; depending on the context, this can be done through manifest violence and/or through strategies that seek to "win hearts and minds."

Another example you may want to consider is the War on Terror—which used more necropolitical forms such as black sites, torture, and Guantanamo Bay, but then was very vested in using state-building and development (especially in Iraq and Afghanistan) to completely transform people's political and economic subjectivities to benefit US empire and capital.

What is the role of history in the study of the international order today?

Studying history is critical—but who is writing that history and whose voices they are 'listening to' also matters. History is certainly one of the fields that has and continues to contribute to colonial processes; this is partly why it is such a contested terrain in so many places today. But it is important to continue to keep asking questions about the past, and interrogate how it plays a role in the present.

Do the practices of colonial occupation by democratic countries extend to other parts of the world? What role do transnational solidarities play in making apparent these neocolonial patterns worldwide and potentially dismantling them?

Yes, absolutely. What has been very interesting to me is that these colonial occupations exist across all types of countries—authoritarian, democratic, secular, socialist, capitalist. This calls into question the territorial sovereignty of the nation-state itself, no matter the "type" of government. Zones of colonial occupation can also help us think about how nation-states can slide into varying political formations, because it is often these zones that go from being a "state of exception" to the "norm." We see that with India today, which was purported to be a democracy and secular, obscuring its colonial nature. When discussing the "slide into authoritarianism" or the "democratic backsliding" in India today, how can we not situate it into the longer histories of India's colonial occupation of Kashmir?

In terms of other parts of the world, I think we have to look no further than the country where I reside—the United States, as well as Israel, both of which are considered "democracies" but maintain their own (settler) colonial occupations. Many of these states also work closely together—they buy arms and surveillance technology from one another and they collaborate on developing new mechanisms of controlling resistance as well as exploiting resources.

That's why it has also become very clear to me over the years that transnational solidarity is crucial, and building these connections across these various zones of occupation—while recognizing their particular specificities—is important. There is strength in being able to identify these patterns; we cannot view these places as exceptional or operating in isolation. And those who organize on the ground have also been able to see the importance of thinking across multiple oppressions in tandem; consider the anti-racism and anti-war movements in the US in the past as well as today's #stopcopcity movement.

Through which sites (such as art, culture, memory) can we learn about anti-colonial, alternative conceptions of the world order? What are these alternate modes of being premised upon? Has any substantive conception of this sort emerged from Kashmir?

At times, seemingly alternative conceptions of the world order replicate some of its most violent hierarchies and logics. I think about this often vis-à-vis the number of nation-states involved in the Third World project, which of course played an important role in resisting *Western* colonization, but nonetheless, still relied on the very same norms of territoriality and sovereignty as the European nation-states, and in doing so, often became colonial. I think fundamentally the *most* alternate modes of being for worldmaking are premised upon a rejection of Euro-centric epistemology, and that requires a rethinking of Enlightenment thought and practice, which have otherwise become so normalized, and its logics internalized.

I see Kashmiris doing this in different ways in their writings, art, expressions, and slogans. For example, during protests, Kashmiris often use the slogan "Hum kya chahte? Azadi! Azadi ka matlab kya? La illaha ila Allah!" translated to "What do we want? Freedom. What is the meaning of freedom—that there is no God but Allah." Not only does this articulation challenge Euro-centric secularist norms by invoking a model of liberation through and with Islam at the center, but it also rejects the sovereign power of the occupying regime (in this case, India) by declaring the power of the *greatest* sovereign.

Nowadays, even the protests in Kashmir have been completely clamped down upon. State repression over the decades has made it extremely difficult for Kashmiris to build a substantive, easily recognizable alternate mode of being, but that does not mean it does not exist. I think we are only just getting started with examining Kashmiri intellectual and cultural production as well as modes of resistance over the years, especially in relation to its decolonial potentiality.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I would recommend that young scholars of international relations read broadly and beyond their discipline, and

engage with critical perspectives from fields ranging from history, anthropology, and film and media studies. If possible, try to travel as much as you can, and learn languages. I would also encourage them to question the narratives and histories that nation-states tell about themselves. Finally, while it is important to understand how the current liberal international order emerged, it's also equally important to imagine possibilities and imaginaries beyond it.